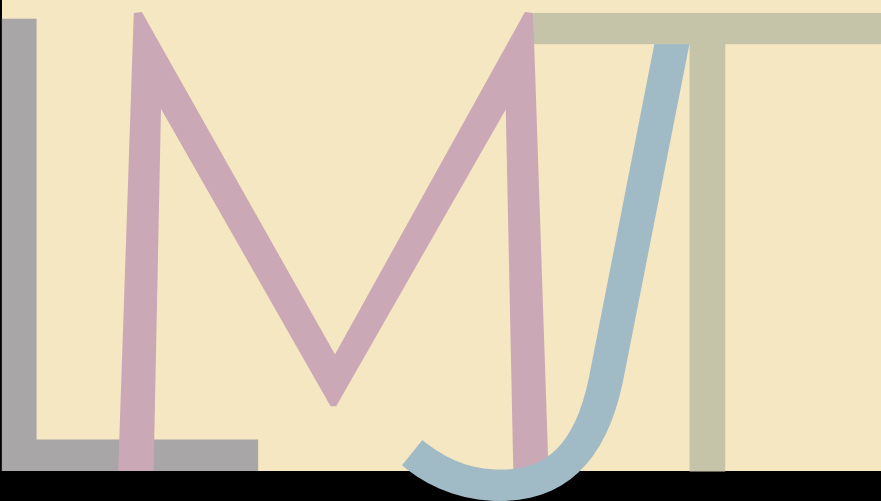


Edited by  
Paweł Maciejko

# Sabbatian Heresy

WRITINGS ON

MYSTICISM,  
MESSIANISM,  
& THE ORIGINS  
OF JEWISH  
MODERNITY



"The best collection in English of this extraordinary messianic movement. . . . Maciejko's introduction is the most original contribution to the history of this movement since Gershom Scholem's 1936 essay 'Redemption Through Sin' and will set the agenda for all future research."

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The pronouncements of Sabbatai Tsevi (1626–76) gave rise to Sabbataianism, a key messianic movement in Judaism that spread across Europe, Asia, and North Africa. Despite Tsevi's conversion to Islam in 1666, Sabbataianism continued to exist as a heretical underground movement, provoking intense opposition from rabbinic authorities and impacting central developments of later Judaism like the Haskalah, the Reform movement, Hasidism, and the secularization of Jewish society.

This volume provides a selection of the most original and influential texts composed by Sabbatai Tsevi and his followers, complemented by fragments of the works of their rabbinic opponents and contemporary observers and some literary works inspired by Sabbataianism. An introduction and annotations by Paweł Maciejko provide historical, political, and social context for the documents.

**PAWEŁ MACIEJKO** is an associate professor of history and Leonard and Helen R. Stulman Chair in Classical Jewish Religion, Thought, and Culture at Johns Hopkins University. His first book, *The Mixed Multitude: Jacob Frank and the Frankist Movement, 1755–1816*, was awarded the Salo Baron Prize by the American Academy of Jewish Research and the Jordan Schnitzer Book Award by the Association for Jewish Studies.

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## Sabbatian Heresy

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Edited by  
Paweł Maciejko

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MYSTICISM, MESSIANISM,  
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*For Adam, the first*

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## Foreword

It is with great enthusiasm that we greet the publication of this volume on Sabbatianism and its significance in modern Jewish thought. Everything about Sabbatai Tsevi's life (1626–1672) and thought was shot through with world-changing theological convulsion. The dates of his birth (9th of Av) and death (the Day of Atonement) point to the symbolic significance of the movements and traditions he initiated and inspired, either directly or indirectly, up through the nineteenth century. Catastrophe, exile, and divine abandonment became the necessary conditions out of which the urgent promise of personal and collective redemption could be anticipated. And in these radical orientations, the reestablishment of connections with the divine required a breaking and reordering of normative structures. The spiritual and intellectual impact and legacy of Sabbatian thought courses between apocalyptic, messianic, and redemptive signification. The entire Jewish world changed after the 1660s with the appearance of a Jewish messiah, who then converted to Islam while on his way to assume his kingship over a third Jewish commonwealth in the Land of Israel. This volume addresses the global reverberations of Sabbatai's announced messianic arrival, his apostasy, and the reconfigurations of inter-religious practice and belief that came in their wake. Gathered here are central texts that offer a glimpse into the notoriously secret and stigmatized world of Sabbatianism, and present the reader with texts from Sabbatai Tsevi, his contemporary disciples, subsequent prophets, Sabbatian controversies that emerged in Europe and in the Ottoman Empire, as well as later iterations of Sabbatian ideas and literary representations. The editor, Paweł Maciejko, has challenged us to assess the reception of Sabbatian mystical thought as something that went well beyond its more common portrayal as a misadventure in messianic manipulation and salacious rituals of transgression and to consider Sabbatianism as a substantive tradition marking the origins of modern Jewish thought.

*Eugene R. Sheppard and Samuel Moyn, Editors*  
*The Brandeis Library of Modern Jewish Thought*



## Introduction

Jesus of Nazareth and Sabbatai Tsevi were the two most important Jewish messiahs in history. The former became the founder of the world's largest religion, whose theological traditions and liturgical practices have been flourishing for the past two thousand years. The truth of his messianic mission has been the central article of faith for millions of believers. His teachings, as recorded in the Gospels, have served as inspiration for countless works of genius and take their place in the treasury of humanity's moral and religious heritage. The latter, for his part, never became a household name: to the extent that he is known outside the narrow circle of scholars specializing in early modern Judaism, he is generally considered a colossal failure of messianic hopes and aspirations. The spiritual awakening initiated by Sabbatai Tsevi (arguably also a new religion in the making) spectacularly collapsed less than a year after its inception. The creed of his faith, largely forgotten, seems too bizarre to merit a serious discussion. Any lingering traces of belief in his messianic mandate have long since disappeared from living memory. For most of those who do remember him, Sabbatai Tsevi and his messianism constituted a burst of short-lived religious enthusiasm fueled by naïveté and credulity. An inexplicable oddity. A bubble on the current of history. An intriguing anecdote—at best. Yet behind these simplistic images, a more complex reality lurks. Sabbatai's messianic allure, transitory though it was, calls for serious reflection: aside from Jesus, Tsevi was the only Jewish messiah whose gospel gained sufficient momentum to break through the confines of a particular social group or a specific geographical milieu. The countless would-be saviors of the Jews (or redeemers of the world) who appeared between antiquity and the modern period might have been important in their local settings, but remained practically unknown outside their own communities. Breaking this mold, Sabbatianism, as the movement founded by Tsevi came to be called, for a brief period captured the entire Jewish world and all strata of Jewish society—Jews of the Orient and Occident, rich and poor, learned and illiterate, men and women. Further, Christianity excepted, Sabbatianism was the single messianic upheaval among the Jews that exerted a significant impact on the surrounding societies. The eruption of religious fervor around Sabbatai Tsevi in the 1660s was probably the highest-profile event involving Jewish communities prior to

the twentieth century. It echoed in innumerable contemporary letters, memoirs, travelogues, and newspaper reports. Rulers of empires as well as high-ranking Muslim and Christian clergymen were actively involved in shaping the course of events affecting Sabbatai and his followers, and devised strategies of response to the spreading of messianism among the masses. Some—albeit very few—non-Jews became ardent believers in Tsevi. Leading intellectuals of the age creatively engaged with Sabbatianism and wrote passionate rejoinders to its momentous emergence and stunning downfall.

The importance of Sabbatai Tsevi transcends his immediate period. If we consider as Sabbatianism not only the outburst of public messianic ardor that briefly surrounded Tsevi, but also the entire debate triggered by his advent, then the movement was less short lived than often assumed: most of the controversies that took place in the Jewish world between the mid-seventeenth and the mid-nineteenth century were associated in one way or another with Sabbatianism. Sabbatai's followers developed a set of theological doctrines in which Jewish tradition was reinterpreted in novel and highly unorthodox ways and was merged with Muslim and later Christian elements. These doctrines, as well as the (allegedly or actually) licentious and transgressive behavior of many Sabbatians, provoked intense opposition (and therefore significant polemical literature) from rabbinic authorities. The patterns of polemics that emerged on the occasion of Sabbatianism formed the basis for other disputes. Quarrels between Sabbatians and their detractors had a profound impact on the contours of central controversies of later Judaism, such as debates surrounding the emergence of Hassidism, the Haskalah, and the Reform movement. In the twentieth century, numerous works of art and literature attest to the deep fascination with the figure of Sabbatai Tsevi. For some major Jewish thinkers, his rise and fall constitutes the key to the most crucial phenomena of modern Jewish history: Zionism and the establishment of Jewish political sovereignty and the secularization of traditional Jewish society. In short, any real discussion of the early modern and modern Jewish experience must take into account Sabbatianism. In such reflection, both the internal diversity of Jewish society and a cross-sectional view of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim relations during the past three hundred years can be considered.

An outline of the messiah's biography is in place. Sabbatai Tsevi was born on the 9th of Av, 1626, in Smyrna (Izmir), on the Aegean coast of Anatolia. He received the preliminaries of traditional Jewish education from the leading scholars of his natal city, Rabbis Isaac de Alba and Joseph Escapa. At the age of fifteen,

Tsevi abandoned the yeshivah and embarked on a path of solitary study and meditation, dabbling in Kabbalah and esoteric lore. He also began to experience states of profound depression interspersed with moments of ecstatic euphoria. During the latter, Tsevi performed strange acts and invented bizarre rituals, some of which involved blatant violations of Jewish law. In 1648, in a moment of ecstasy, he pronounced aloud the Ineffable Name of God and proclaimed himself the messiah. Nobody took this claim seriously; most of those who knew him considered him mentally ill. However, the messianic pronouncements and outlandish actions continued, and the Smyrna rabbis eventually expelled Sabbatai from the city. Throughout the 1650s, Tsevi wandered through Greece, Thrace, Turkey, and Egypt, to settle, in 1662, in Jerusalem. Doubting himself and overcome with an intense sense of guilt, he tried to suppress both his messianic visions and his abnormal behavior. Sabbatai became a normative (if possibly slightly strange) member of the Jerusalem Jewish community, on whose behalf he undertook a journey to Cairo. On his way back in April 1665, he met in Gaza the Kabbalistic prodigy Nathan Benjamin Ashkenazi. Several months prior to this meeting, Nathan had experienced a revelation, the centerpiece of which was the image of the messiah Sabbatai Tsevi engraved upon the Throne of Glory. The encounter was a turning point in both their lives; Nathan managed to convince Sabbatai to accept the truth of his messianic destiny, and provided him with conceptual tools allowing for an explanation of his nonnormative conduct. Idiosyncratic acts and rituals (termed by Nathan *ma'asim zarim*, strange deeds) were signs of Tsevi's elevated messianic rank and the basis for future rites of his faithful. The cycles of depression and euphoria were external expressions of the messiah's internal struggle against the powers of darkness. In May 1665, in Gaza, Sabbatai Tsevi again publicly proclaimed himself the messiah. This time, the entire community was swept up with him. Nathan had several other prophetic visions, and he composed theological pronouncements elaborating on them. These were copied and sent to distant Jewish communities as circular epistles, which triggered the spread of the messianic enthusiasm first in Palestine and Egypt and subsequently also in other parts of the Ottoman Empire and most of Christian Europe. By October 1665, Jewish communities from Persia to Morocco and from Yemen to Poland were engulfed in religious frenzy. Ecstatic trances, prophecies, apparitions, and other supernatural phenomena multiplied. Poems and songs in honor of the messiah were composed, enthusiastic sermons were preached, and celebrations of the imminent redemption were held; in most Jewish communities skeptics and opponents of Tsevi were a tiny—and at times

persecuted—minority. Diaspora Jews began selling their properties and closing businesses in expectation of the approaching move to the Land of Israel, where the final stage of redemption was to take place. At this point, Sabbatai Tsevi's predilection for transgressive actions reached its peak: he ate prohibited foods, abolished fasts and established new festivals, instituted new blessings and prayers, called upon women to read the Law, dismissed rabbis and communal leaders, and appointed "kings," among whom he divided the world. He also declared that before long he would seize the crown of the Ottoman sultan.

In December 1665, Tsevi sailed to Constantinople. Worried about the spread of religious fervor, the Turkish authorities intercepted his boat on the open sea. Sabbatai was brought in chains to the fortress of Gallipoli, where he remained until the summer of the following year. To the great surprise of his detractors, the Turks treated the prisoner with honor, allowing him to hold court and to send and receive envoys, among them rabbinic and Kabbalistic luminaries. Muslim respect coupled with the continuing spread of the prophetic propaganda among the Jews brought the messianic hopes to an apotheosis: during his imprisonment, Sabbatai issued several pronouncements signed "I am the Lord your God Sabbatai Tsevi," and among some of his believers he came to be considered a divine figure. The anticlimax came in September 1666: on the fifteenth of that month Sabbatai was brought before Sultan Mehmed IV in Adrianople. Accounts of this meeting are riddled with contradiction, but one thing is certain: from the meeting with the ruler of the Ottoman Empire, Sabbatai Tsevi emerged a Muslim.

Following his conversion, Sabbatai Tsevi received instruction in the tenets of Islam, studied the Qur'an, began praying in a mosque, and developed contacts with Muslim mystics, including members of Dervish orders. He also continued to study the Zohar and other Kabbalistic writings, prayed at home in Hebrew, and observed, apparently with the silent consent of the authorities, most ritual commandments of Judaism. During his recurrent states of illumination, he maintained his earlier erratic pattern of behavior, repeatedly proclaiming the continuance of his messianic mission despite his conversion, inventing yet more festivals and rites, and allegedly engaging in numerous immoral practices. It seems that the Turks turned a blind eye to Sabbatai's enduring adherence to Jewish customs and his excesses because they planned to deploy him as a missionary among the Jews. Indeed, at moments of euphoria, Tsevi made several calls on his followers to embrace Islam, causing a conversion of some two hundred Jewish families. Yet if the Ottoman authorities hoped for a large Jewish apostasy

and quick integration of the converts into the dominant society, they miscalculated. Acting on the explicit instruction of the messiah, the converts avoided mingling with born Muslims and preserved close ties with those followers of Sabbatai who remained within the framework of official Judaism. Thus, a tightly knit sectarian group that consisted of nominal Muslims and nominal Jews and whose primary religious identity was neither Jewish nor Muslim but Sabbatian was formed.

In August 1672, Sabbatai was denounced to the authorities for his duplicitous and licentious behavior. In January of the following year he was exiled to Ulcinj (Dulcigno) in Albania. He continued writing letters and dispatching emissaries, and some of his believers, including Nathan of Gaza, managed to visit him there. He died on the Day of Atonement, September 17, 1676.

For a mass messianic movement, Sabbatianism produced scarcely any theology. Precious few Sabbatian texts were composed during its heyday, before Sabbatai's conversion to Islam. After the conversion, Tsevi came to epitomize for most Jews as well as for many Christians and Muslims the notion of a "false messiah." He was subsumed under the familiar categories of religious impostor, charlatan, and sect leader. These labels were taken up—rather uncritically—by early historians of Sabbatianism. Yet they are highly problematic. First and foremost, as a term of scholarly analysis, "false messiah" is a poorly constructed concept. It is an obvious oxymoron: a messiah who is false is simply not a messiah; a messiah who is a messiah cannot, by definition, be false. Further, benchmarks of falsity invoked (or implicitly presumed) by those who use the term "false messiah" are in themselves problematic. Even if we argue (and this is a risky proposal) that in the course of the historical development of the Jewish religion, all Jews have accepted some universal standards of messiahship (such as Maimonides's Laws Pertaining to the Messiah), such standards are not operative categories of scholarship but rather its subjects. Claims that a particular messianic pretender was false according to set criteria should be *studied* by scholars; they should not be *made* by them. Finally, the term "false messiah" implies a value judgment. Scholars of early Christianity are not in the habit of offering disclaimers concerning the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was and indeed is considered a false messiah by some, nor are they accustomed to making declarations concerning their belief or disbelief in the matter. Scholars of Sabbatai Tsevi should, perhaps, exhibit the same restraint.

Even prior to Sabbatai Tsevi's conversion it was obvious to all that he did not fit any of the existing conceptions of the messiah. He and his followers knew



it perfectly well; they never pretended he did. Some of the Sabbatians rejected the very possibility of formulating criteria of messiahship akin to the ones formulated by Maimonides; others proposed their own messianic parameters; yet others turned the argument on its head and contended that the very lack of fulfillment of traditional criteria by Sabbatai signaled the truth of his mission. The significance of Sabbatianism for Jewish messianic speculation is not merely that it was the largest movement of its kind or that it had a profound impact on other religious and political phenomena; most critical is that it was the most important attempt in the history of post–Second Temple Judaism to define (or to redefine) the very category of messianism. Sabbatianism’s singularity was that an act which should have marked the utter failure of the purported redeemer, his conversion, did not put an absolute end to the belief in his messianic vocation. For the vast majority of Sabbatai’s followers, pious Jews that they were, the apostasy did disqualify his claims to a messianic mandate. Their adventure with messianism ended the minute the object of their hopes became a Muslim. For a few, however, the conversion was merely a stage for the unfolding redemption drama. In fact, Sabbatianism as a highly original form of thought began precisely where Sabbatianism as a mass messianic movement ended. Sabbatian thought took off as an attempt to explain the inexplicable: to imbue Tsevi’s apostasy with religious meaning. The conversion of the messiah was a necessary step in his salvific mission.

The notion of the necessary apostasy of the messiah constituted the inner kernel of Sabbatianism. The social profile and theological tenets of the Sabbatian religion were determined not so much by Tsevi’s claims to be the messiah, but by his conversion to Islam and the novel way the conversion was conceptualized in the writings of his prophets and disciples. The foundations of this conceptualization have been reconstructed in the seminal works of Gershom Scholem. While Scholem was by no means the first scholar to tackle Sabbatianism (important contributions to the reconstruction of the history of the movement had been made by David Kahana, Majer Bałaban, Heinrich Graetz, and Simon Dubnow, among others), he was the first historian to move beyond the false messiah paradigm. Rather than a priori dismissing Tsevi as an impostor or madman and his followers as delusional fanatics, Scholem sought to unearth the social and intellectual substructure of the movement. Undeterred by the ostensible absurdity of the doctrines of the messiah’s “strange actions” and his necessary apostasy, he took the ideas of the Sabbatians with utmost seriousness and proposed to understand them on their own terms. His was the first

—and in many ways unsurpassed—attempt to tease out the inner workings of Sabbatianism.

According to Scholem, Sabbatian theology “in all its infinite varieties” had its common root in efforts to resolve the “contradiction” between “the inner and the outer reality of redemption.”<sup>1</sup> For the believers, redemption became an “unmediated reality,” an “overwhelming experience,”<sup>2</sup> whose inner certainty had to be reconciled with the empirical reality of historical events. Since the majority of the Jews accepted—if only for a brief period of time—Sabbatai as the true messiah, “the sheer quantitative magnitude of the revival had become a qualitative factor.”<sup>3</sup> Faced with Sabbatai’s apostasy, a number of his adherents “refused to submit to the sentence of history,”<sup>4</sup> and continued to follow him despite the fact that he had become a Muslim. Accordingly, they sought in classical Jewish texts allusions to the notion that the messiah would *perform* apostatize.<sup>5</sup> This search promptly yielded fruit, and a number of theological “ideologizations”<sup>6</sup> of this deed were developed. First, the conversion was interpreted as a descent of the powers of righteousness embodied in the messiah into the world of evil and impurity (*kelippot*, husks, in the terminology of Kabbalah). The purpose of this descent was further expounded as an endeavor to bring about the total destruction of the *kelippot* or, conversely, as an attempt to save the sparks of holiness trapped among them. While all those who continued to adhere to Sabbatai Tsevi after the apostasy accepted one of the variants of this basic theological paradigm, Scholem distinguished at this point two major wings within the movement: “moderate” Sabbatians held that the messiah’s conversion was a *sui generis* act, one that was not intended to serve as an example for others, whereas “radical” Sabbatians maintained that he should be followed all the way into apostasy.<sup>7</sup> The most important representatives of the latter wing were, according to Scholem, the Dönme of Salonika, who converted to Islam in 1683, and the 1759 Frankist converts to Catholicism in Poland. These radicals among radicals drew ultimate conclusions from Sabbatai’s “constitutive act”; they turned conversion into a positive commandment and argued that the “true faith cannot be a faith which men publicly profess.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, in its most extreme expressions Sabbatianism led to a fundamental impasse: the impossibility of reconciling one’s true religious identity with one’s social role.<sup>9</sup> In the final analysis, Sabbatianism was for Scholem “religious nihilism,” wherein values and spiritual tenets of normative Judaism were shattered beyond repair, while seemingly orthodox practices of moderate Sabbatians—and even more so, new religions adopted by their radical brethren—were mere disguises lacking any deeper meaning or significance.

The notion of religious nihilism did not imply simply a rejection of values or mores associated with normative religion. Rather, as Scholem put it: “By this concept I do not mean nihilism with regard to religion but rather a nihilism that appears in the name of religious assertions and follows from religious tenets. It adopts religious discourse but it completely denies the authority, which this discourse claims to possess. It does not attempt to replace the old structures with new ones, but tries only to destroy them.”<sup>10</sup> Sabbatian conversionary theology was nihilistic, for it simultaneously repudiated “vulgar” or “unenlightened” religious experience, and recommended the conscious and systematic desecration of the values of traditional religion as the way of the elect to true redemption. Although Scholem qualified his analyses by saying that many Sabbatians combined their belief in the messiah with perfectly orthodox Jewish observance, he also affirmed clearly that the antinomianism that stemmed from Tsevi’s “strange deeds” was not found on the accidental fringe of the Sabbatian movement, but rather constituted its very core. All Sabbatianism, from its very foundations, was nihilistic: antinomian practices logically followed from the Sabbatian worldview, regardless of whether or not a particular believer actualized them in practice. Scholem’s most famous statement on the subject (perhaps his most famous publication of all) is titled *Mitsvah ha-Ba’ah be-Avera* (literally: a commandment that is fulfilled by the breaking of another commandment). The phrase, especially after its mistranslation into English as *Redemption through Sin*, came to be regarded as the catchword of Sabbatianism.

In calling Sabbatianism religious nihilism, the author of *Redemption through Sin* by no means meant to condemn the movement. The description, instead, was intended to frame it as a necessary stage in the all-encompassing “dialectic of Jewish history.” The function of Sabbatianism in this dialectic was that of an “antithesis”: the most radical excesses of Tsevi’s believers were to annihilate the petrified forms of religion, while at the same time sowing seeds for future developments. Scholem relentlessly advanced the view that despite its antinomianism and frontal attacks on normative religious authorities, even despite the apostasies it inspired, from its very beginning till its last vestiges Sabbatianism was “distinctly Jewish in character”: it was a “grandiose though abortive attempt to revolutionize Judaism from within.”<sup>11</sup> Hence, Scholem argued, “Sabbatianism must be regarded [ . . . ] as a single continuous development which retained its identity in the eyes of its adherents regardless of whether they themselves remained Jews or not, but also, paradoxical though it may seem, as a specifically Jewish phenomenon to the end.”<sup>12</sup>

Gershom Scholem's theorization of Sabbatianism (whose spirit and characteristic idiom I tried to preserve in the preceding paragraphs) is nothing short of a grand narrative. Pre-Scholem Jewish historiography outlined fairly well the history of Sabbatai Tsevi and his following, yet it failed to propose an interpretative paradigm for an understanding of its sources and importance. Sabbatianism was treated as an artificial implantation on the healthy body of the Jewish people. Its sudden appearance and staggering success among both the rabbinic elite and the Jewish masses had no internal logic and could be explained only by reference to foreign pressures and stimuli. Scholem's insistence on the Jewishness of Sabbatianism allowed him to paint a more coherent and inclusive picture of Sabbatai Tsevi's messianism; it also permitted him to present it as a legitimate element within the wider framework of the history of Judaism and of the Jewish people. Sabbatianism came to be presented as a distinctive "movement," stemming from the same impulses, responding to the same needs, and expressing itself in different variants of the same theology. Varied and disparate phenomena spanning a period of more than one hundred and fifty years were subsumed under the same rubric. Different theological positions as well as different—and at times antagonistic—splinter groups associated with Sabbatianism were points on the same spectrum, whose poles were marked by a distinction between "moderate" and "radical" Sabbatians. While initially intended as a distinction between those followers of Sabbatai Tsevi who remained formally Jewish and those who followed him into apostasy, Scholem later extended this dichotomy into other aspects of Sabbatian theology and praxis, such as the antinomian excesses of the radicals versus traditional observances of the moderates or the acceptance of the divinity of the messiah by the former versus the belief in his purely human nature by the latter. In Scholem's view, Sabbatian concepts were valid (if at times highly idiosyncratic) reinterpretations of canonical Jewish sources. The ideas put forward by Sabbatian prophets and Kabbalists were taken up and further creatively transformed by normative Jewish thinkers and thus reintegrated into mainstream Jewish culture. The movement had a spiritual and intellectual genealogy (in Lurianic Kabbalah) and progeny (in Hasidism,<sup>13</sup> Haskalah,<sup>14</sup> and ultimately Zionism).<sup>15</sup>

Scholem's commitment to the homogeneity, unity, and especially the "specifically Jewish" nature of Sabbatianism had two important corollaries. The first was an emphatic denial of any substantial external influence on the movement (the author of *Redemption through Sin* performed intellectual somersaults to demonstrate that the outbreak of Sabbatianism "owed absolutely nothing"

to contemporary non-Jewish millenarianism and messianism). Scholem did not deny the influences on the later Sabbatian theology, but he claimed that “the crisis in Judaism came from within and it would hardly have taken any other course had there been no Christian influence.”<sup>16</sup> The second corollary was his equally emphatic stance that alien religious creeds adopted by some Sabbatians were “merely external façade[s],”<sup>17</sup> “which they regarded of course as purely extrinsic”<sup>18</sup> (expressions such as “of course” and “obviously” are sprinkled liberally throughout the different formulations of this point in all of Scholem’s essays on Sabbatianism). Sabbatian converts were “voluntary Marranos,”<sup>19</sup> who superficially adopted other religions, while secretly preserving Judaism as they understood it. They became Muslim or Christian, but in the words of Scholem, “remained Jewish in their hearts.”<sup>20</sup>

Gershom Scholem’s imposing hermeneutical edifice defined the parameters of the subsequent scholarly debate. Not only did his interpretation permit the integration of Sabbatianism in a larger historical scheme, but most crucially, it amounted to a rewriting of Jewish history in light of Sabbatianism. For Scholem, messianism was certainly a chapter in the history of the Jewish people and one of many factors in the development of Jewish religion. But it was much, much more than that. The entirety of Jewish history was, on a deeper level, the history of messianism; messianic “energies” were hidden engines behind the development of virtually all major religious and political phenomena that shaped Jewish life through the ages.

The immensely persuasive power of Scholem’s writings on Sabbatianism stem from their scope and boldness, as well as from their pure literary beauty. His studies are worth reading independent of any discussion on the validity of his interpretation: they are masterpieces. This said, for many readers his interpretation of Sabbatianism became not one of its many possible interpretations; it became Sabbatianism *per se*. While numerous scholars have added important—and some truly excellent—contributions that challenged particular points raised by Scholem, corrected some of his factual inaccuracies, or discussed texts or individuals associated with Tsevi’s sect that were never the object of his attention, scholarship has largely upheld his conceptual apparatus and even his characteristic phraseology. Few serious attempts to challenge Scholem’s broader perspective or propose a truly different view on Sabbatianism have been made. No scholar after Scholem has shared his ambition of rewriting the history of the Jewish people as the history of messianism, exploring Sabbatianism’s genealogy in the Middle Ages, or tracing its impact on modern and contemporary religious

and political phenomena. No one has written a monograph of the movement in its entirety or even a single phase of its unfolding. Instead, we have brief essays, each engaging with a particular Sabbatian personality or suggesting a close reading of a specific Sabbatian text.

I wish to draw attention to two approaches to Sabbatianism that reach beyond Scholem and his explanatory paradigm as it has been taken up and extended by other scholars. In so doing, I do not mean to imply the lack of validity on the part of Scholem's reading (and as noted, his reading hardly lacks elegance). It seems to me, however, that all that can be seen from Scholem's particular perspective has already been seen. Repeating his interpretative moves in light of yet another Sabbatian text or yet another event from the movement's history would simply belabor the point.

The first avenue of reflection touches on the syncretic or, better, transreligious facet of Sabbatianism. Sabbatai Tsevi must have solved the thorny issue as to which Islamic practices to adopt and, conversely, which Jewish observances to carry over to his life as a Muslim (till the end of his life, Sabbatai's religious praxis consisted of a curious admixture of Jewish and Muslim rituals). All subsequent Sabbatian converts had to negotiate a dual religious identity. Yet even for the Sabbatians who did not convert, the question of selective reception and rejection of alien notions and practices became a primary preoccupation. In Nathan of Gaza's theology, as reconstructed by Scholem, Sabbatai Tsevi converted to Islam in order to fight satanic forces on their own territory: conversion had the twin purpose of eradicating evil from within and saving the sparks of sanctity that had been ensnared by the demonic. For the messiah's followers, this idea had far-reaching implications: the world into which Sabbatai Tsevi (and those of his faithful who joined him in apostasy) entered could no longer be considered an undifferentiated dominion of darkness. It demanded careful study, both for the purpose of "learning your enemy" and in order to trace and rescue the elements of holiness that might have gone astray therein. Thus, from the very outset, Sabbatian thought displayed a keen interest in other peoples and other religions: from the moment the messiah entered the foreign realm of the nations of the world, questions concerning foreign traditions became key points of Sabbatian theology. The aspect of this problem that has received the most scholarly attention is the syncretic character of some Sabbatian rites and tenets of belief.

The question of the syncretic motif of Sabbatianism was first raised by Scholem himself, if only in a single paper that stands in opposition to the main line of his inquiry. In his masterful essay on Berukhiah, the leader of the Koniosos,

a Muslim Sabbatian subject in Salonika, the Israeli scholar expounded the doctrines of programmatic syncretists, who understood their conversion to Islam as a step in the redemptive process of fusing different religions. For the radical group of Koniosos, Islam was not only a mask for heterodox Judaism. They believed in the unity of all faiths and consciously included in their creed alien and diverse tenets.<sup>21</sup> Scholem went to great pains to emphasize that this particular aspect of Berukhiah's teachings was highly unusual even against the backdrop of other Sabbatian doctrines, including those of other Sabbatian subgroups of Salonika. In his view, the syncretistic tendency and positive attitude toward non-Jewish religions was not an organic development of Sabbatianism, but derived from the encounter with Muslim sectarian groups of the Ottoman Empire such as the Bektashi dervishes, whose rituals and teachings likewise included a strong syncretistic component involving elements of Christianity, Gnosticism, Shia Islam, as well as various pagan and animistic beliefs. The Koniosos did not belong to what he termed "classical Sabbatianism." Accordingly, among Scholem's studies on Sabbatianism, the Berukhiah essay remains a one-off oddity: his other works (including his other articles on the believers of Salonika) rehearsed the rhetoric of non-Jewish religions understood as "merely exterior facades" and "voluntary Marranism."

Scholem's presentation of Berukhiah's syncretism as exceptional and of all Sabbatians as "true Jews at heart" regardless of their "external" roles and religious affiliations might suit some strands of Sabbatianism (and might attest as well to his extraordinary ability to read the human heart). However, it does not account for the ubiquity among many Sabbatians of elements of rites and beliefs that could not be derived, except by the most strained arguments, from Jewish tradition. It also does not engage the wider—and more important—issue of Sabbatians' conscious attitude to such elements. The key question is not *if* Sabbatianism incorporated elements of other religions; the key question is *why* it did so. Scholem's notion that Sabbatianism contained a syncretic element, yet this element appeared only on the fringes of the movement, has been challenged by Yehudah Liebes. According to Liebes, a transconfessional feature was present in the main line of development of Sabbatian theology from the very beginning and can be discerned not only in the Tsevi's attitude to Islam, but also in Nathan's announcement that the true messiah would redeem even Jesus. The "dialectics" (Liebes approves of and appropriates Scholem's use of the concept) expressed itself here in attempts to mediate between the nihilistic position expressing itself in disdain or enmity for non-Jewish religions seen as the realm of *kelippot*, and



the syncretic thrust that sought in all of them positive sides.<sup>22</sup> Seeking positivity in other religions might have led to conversion, but did not necessarily do so. Indeed, according to Liebes, in its most developed expressions Sabbatian syncretism amounted to a “religious renewal” of Judaism by other faiths.<sup>23</sup> Liebes mostly engaged eighteenth-century Sabbatianism in Christian Europe; in his view, during this period the syncretic aspect of Sabbatian thought became so pronounced that Sabbatianism could have been understood by Christian missionaries (including converted Jews familiar with intra-Jewish debates) as a kind of “crypto-Christianity.”<sup>24</sup>

I fully concur with Liebes's view that it was precisely the mainstream, and not the fringe, of Sabbatianism that absorbed non-Jewish concepts and practices. I also believe that research on Christian and Christianizing undercurrents of Sabbatian thought is particularly auguring. Oddly for a group whose leader converted to the Muslim religion, Sabbatians, including those in the Ottoman Empire, seemed to be much more preoccupied with Christianity than with Islam. Nathan of Gaza's messianic pursuits included a visit to Rome, and his texts invoke Jesus but not Mohammad. His treatises contain Hebrew calques of Latin technical expressions of religious discourse.<sup>25</sup> No systematic research has been carried out on this issue, but it seems that he had at least some familiarity with Christian theological texts. Avraham Miguel Cardozo, Sabbatianism's principal converso theologian, received a thorough Christian education before leaving the Iberian Peninsula and returning to Judaism in Venice. Although Cardozo consistently downplayed his Christian past (and ferociously fought accusations of carrying vestiges of Christianity into his Judaism), there is no doubt that he retained a deep interest in theological questions that had occupied him in his Christian youth. Cardozo served as a main channel for the transmission of Christian ideas into Sabbatianism; his works contain numerous quotations and paraphrases of the texts of the Church Fathers and medieval theologians. These citations are hardly ever referenced, and they were likely not recognized as Christian in origin by most of his Jewish readers. Still, through Cardozo this thought entered the universe of Sabbatian discourse and became further elaborated in encounter with canonical Jewish texts. Cardozo's main disciple, Nehemiah Hayon, is a case in point. Hayon developed a Sabbatian doctrine of a Triune God. Like his teacher, he emphatically denied any Christian sympathies or influences and argued that the Christian concept of the Trinity is merely a distortion and vulgarization of its proper, that is to say Jewish, version. It is an open question whether Hayon took his own denials seriously. What is crystal



clear, however, is that he could not avoid questions about the relationship of his teachings to those of the Christians. For Sabbatianism, Christianity became an unavoidable point of reference.

Scholem's and Liebes's analyses of Sabbatian syncretism opened up a full gamut of fascinating possibilities of inquiry. Yet the way in which these scholars formulated their main hypotheses and lines of argument seem to me overly narrow. Even sidestepping the methodological debate about the usefulness (or adequacy) of the notion of syncretism in the general study of religions, the key concept strikes me as ill fitted with regard to the specific case of Sabbatianism. Syncretism is far from peculiar to Sabbatianism (every religion, including normative Judaism, is syncretic to some degree). Sabbatianism's singularity was that in it fusing interreligious elements became a positive, and possibly even a supreme, value. It is not merely that different religions "exerted influence" on Sabbatian groups or that some of their tenets were "absorbed" by the Sabbatians; it is that combining elements of different religions became a nexus of a religious program in itself. It is for this reason that Liebes's notion that a syncretic trend in Sabbatianism amounted to enriching Judaism by tenets and rites of other religions may be misleading. The movement's transreligious push did not entail supplementing one religion with elements of others. Rather, it involved a conscious blending of all of them. Judaism was in no way privileged in this process of religious amalgamation. Indeed, in the writings of Cardozo, Jacob Frank, and arguably also Eibeschutz, it was considered in some respects inferior to other faiths.

Syncretism in fact may not be a wholly helpful frame for analysis of the interreligious trait of Sabbatianism. But it certainly does touch a nerve: preoccupation with the non-Jewish world and worldview is one of the most striking features of Sabbatianism. While Sabbatians did not always display a positive or even tolerant attitude toward non-Jews, they never ignored other religions and traditions. They studied them with an intensity that sometimes bordered on obsession (according to contemporary testimony, Rabbi Jonathan Eibeschutz developed an "uncontrolled urge to read books of the priests"<sup>26</sup>).

The importance of the study of Sabbatian syncretism goes beyond the immediate subject of research on the movement initiated by Sabbatai Tsevi. Jewish historiography generally has it that the Jews' prevailing attitude toward non-Jews during the premodern period was guided by solely practical considerations of, on the one hand, defense against political or ecclesiastical encroachments on the Jewish way of life and, on the other, establishing the boundaries of halakh-

ically permissible contact between Jews and Gentiles. References to non-Jewish notions, in this view, were dictated by the demands of polemics, necessitated by the need to find legal frames for everyday interactions, or mere incidental *curiosa*. Alien faiths and cultures of other peoples might have constituted mortal dangers, but were neither real temptations nor serious challenges forcing a true redefinition of Jewish concepts. Jews were not, so to speak, genuinely interested in the outside world.<sup>27</sup> Sabbatianism, however, gives the lie to this classic claim. The profound fascination of many Sabbatians—including many of those belonging to “classical Sabbatianism”—with the non-Jewish world requires explanation. The Sabbatians were certainly the most ecumenical of early modern Jews. While mainstream Jewish discourse habitually bundled all “nations of the world” and their faiths together, Sabbatianism carefully distinguished between different creeds and denominations, often drawing lines not only between large religious formations such as Islam and Christianity, but also between different sects and subgroups, such as different Protestant churches or different Sufi orders. As noted before, the engagement of Sabbatianism with Christianity seems deeper than its engagement with Islam. Some Sabbatians were most knowledgeable about the particulars of Christian theology. For them, the encounter with Christian theological literature was akin to that experienced by Christian Hebraists, who “discovered” in Jewish texts what they knew from their own tradition. They presumed estrangement and found familiarity. In fact, if Christian Hebraism is understood as a Christian interest in Judaism that transcends the immediate needs of contemporaneous religious polemics, it might be argued that some strands of Sabbatianism amounted to a “Jewish Christianity” among the Jews.

The second avenue of inquiry that I wish to propose has to do with the personality of Sabbatai Tsevi and the ideas introduced by the messiah himself, rather than by his followers and interpreters. For Scholem, Sabbatai Tsevi was but a plaything of wider historical processes. The messiah, a yeshivah dropout, lacked not only basic knowledge of Judaism, but the elementary capacity for self-reflection. Indeed, he needed his prophet to explain him to himself. In the reading put forward by the author of *Redemption through Sin*, all early Sabbatian ideas stemmed from Nathan of Gaza’s extraordinarily creative interpretations of Sabbatai’s incongruous actions.<sup>28</sup> Nathan’s speculations, in turn, were “dialectical elaborations” and “sublimations” of deeper and unconscious spiritual energies or conceptual superstructures built upon clashes of social and religious forces that had nothing to do with Sabbatianism as such and existed, in latent form, long before its inception. These forces had been “denied the political and

historical outlets [they] had originally anticipated.”<sup>29</sup> Sabbatianism was their historical moment coming to the fore.

In his early writings on Sabbatianism, Scholem claimed that Sabbatai Tsevi “left no writings and, what is more important, he is not credited with a single unforgettable word, epigram, or speech. As a Kabbalist and a scholar he does not appear to have raised himself above mediocrity.”<sup>30</sup> Yet as more and more of Sabbatai’s letters were unearthed by scholars, Scholem could no longer assert that Sabbatai wrote nothing. Still, he continued to speak of the figure of the messiah with undisguised derision, and continued to maintain that Tsevi’s thought was wholly unoriginal and uninspiring. Scholem was so convinced by this stance that when Sabbatai’s letter expounding his own understanding of apostasy to Islam was discovered, he incorporated fragments of it into the revised version of his monograph, carefully omitting all passages that might have undermined the interpretation he had been advancing. Published in full by Abraham Amarillo, the letter was given a fascinating reading by Yehudah Liebes. First, it turned out that from the outset Tsevi had had his own vision of messiahship, a vision that differed from and to a large extent contradicted that of his prophet Nathan. The messiah placed radical emphasis on a strictly personal relationship with God (in that letter and his other writings Sabbatai repeatedly referred to God as “my God,” “the God of my faith,” “the True Living God,” or “the God of Sabbatai Tsevi”). He contrasted this personal rapport with God with rabbinic, and importantly, Kabbalistic abstract speculations about the Absolute. Moreover, Tsevi did not consider Islam, his adopted faith, a demonic realm; his attitude toward the Muslim religion was much more complex, inclusive, and affirmative. Sabbatai, unlike for some of his followers including Nathan and Cardozo, did not portray his own conversion as an effect of external pressure, but an existential choice, consciously and freely made. This choice was not driven by Kabbalistic teachings about the liberation of the sparks of the holy from the impure, but a leap of faith, a response to the unfathomable command of the living God, whom “he alone knew.” Further, and similarly, Sabbatai’s “antinomian” actions were not, in his own view, antinomian at all. Like the conversion to Islam, they emerged seamlessly from the messiah’s existential proximity to the Creator, who was inaccessible and inconceivable to anyone but Sabbatai himself. The wisdom of the Living God was stupidity in the eyes of the world: the notorious pronunciation aloud of his Ineffable Name was not an intentionally blasphemous act of rebellion against the sacred norms of Judaism, but “Sabbatai Tsevi’s calling his close personal friend, God of Israel, by His private name.”<sup>31</sup>

Liebes's argument is far-reaching in consequence. Sabbatai Tsevi is here appreciated as a persona of his own merit and author of original writings, with Liebes demonstrating that Sabbatianism indeed originated in its messiah, not only in his commentators. As against Scholem, Sabbatai was not a blind tool of wider historical forces but a free agent acting on the basis of his own religious insights. Yet these insights carried destructive potential that needed to be defused. According to Liebes, Jewish messianic belief has had a long history of struggling with the "dialectical tension" (here too, Liebes embraces Scholem's notion of dialectics) between "functional" messianism propounding political visions of national restitution and "mythological" messianism focused on the persona of the messiah.<sup>32</sup> Sabbatai Tsevi disturbed this delicate balance. The world of his personal mythology consisted of only him and his God, leaving no room for visions of communal redemption or, for that matter, for any interest in a wider collective.<sup>33</sup> Nathan of Gaza's theological tour de force was directed at restoring the lost dialectical moment and thereby saving Sabbatian mythology for Judaism as the religion of the Jewish people. Nathan—who "understood Sabbatai Tsevi better than Sabbatai understood himself" (which is to say, understood both the power of Sabbatai's myth and its destructive potential)—succeeded: he managed to translate the messiah's persona into terms that had transpersonal and national value and therefore could "revive and fertilize Judaism."<sup>34</sup>

The personalistic or existential theology of Sabbatianism constitutes a highly fruitful avenue of future study. As yet, no scholar has considered the wider ramifications of Tsevi's ideas and their possible impact on later Sabbatian thought. Liebes, who initiated this line of research, considered it a dead end: Sabbatai's notions had already been reinterpreted by Nathan of Gaza in a way that removed their sting. Fascinating in themselves, the messiah's views were not known among later Sabbatians and had no impact on subsequent developments (none of Liebes's work on syncretistic eighteenth-century Sabbatianism draws upon his essay on Sabbatai's personal God). I take exception to this final-curtain characterization. To begin with, there *does* seem to be further transmission of these ideas in their original form, with all their destructive potential. Avraham Miguel Cardozo and Jonathan Eibeschutz appear to have been familiar with and further developed Sabbatai's views, and Jacob Frank directly quoted Tsevi's letter, a document that he clearly knew very well. Yet even more important than establishing the chain of transmission is another topos. Sabbatian theology is deeply personal (in the sense in which all good theology is deeply personal). The juxtaposition of the existential concept of God directly experienced by an individual

and the abstract deity of reified traditions blindly enforced by the religious establishment appears in the writings of all important personalities of what we today consider the Sabbatian movement, whether or not they were familiar with Tsevi's own writings. The dualism that permeates all Sabbatian teachings from Sabbatai Tsevi's "God of my Faith" and "God of the rabbis," through Avraham Miguel Cardozo's differentiation between the Prime Cause and the God of Israel, until Jonathan Eibeschutz's explorations of the dangerous liaisons between *Atika Kadisha* and *Malka Kadisha*, is, in my opinion, not so much a Gnostic dualism of the good alien God and the evil demiurge, as a Pascalian dichotomy of the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Yaakov and the lifeless Absolute of soulless religious functionaries.

While strict logic did not link the Sabbatian interreligious outlook and its personalistic theology, I would argue that the latter, in its disregard for external boundaries as well as its rejection of inherited or unreflexively accepted norms and principles, made the former not only possible but highly likely. Sabbatai Tsevi's God could not be bound to any religion, including Judaism, the religion in which He first revealed Himself. Hence, He could be sought in all religions. No higher authority could guide this quest for the True God or predict its results. No exclusive claims to clues and regarding His will or nature could be made about any single sacred textual canon. (Nehemiah Hayon proposed to treat *all* books as Kabbalistic books and argued for unbound freedom of their interpretation.) Considering Sabbatianism through the prisms of transreligious approach and theological personalism yields two additional points of inquiry.

First, such a discussion disenchants Sabbatian antinomianism: Sabbatai's "strange deeds" were not absurd acts of a madman explained away by his followers, but strenuous efforts to follow the unfathomable wishes of his personal deity. To the extent that his adherents indeed tried to imitate their messiah, they attempted to emulate not his odd behavior as such but his quest for the understanding and fulfillment of the true God's will. They were prepared to fulfill this will even if it led them to violations of Mosaic Law or to the abandonment of official Judaism, but they never claimed that such violations had inherent value in themselves. Sabbatian patterns of behavior might have been "antinomian" or "blasphemous" in the eyes of contemporary observers, but Sabbatianism never produced a systematic ideology of antinomianism—such an ideology is an artifact of academic research. More important, even these contemporary observers were significantly less impressed by Sabbatian violations of Mosaic Law than modern scholars. While the principal enemies of the Sabbatians (e.g.,

Jacob Sasportas, Moses Hagiz, Jacob Emden) did fulminate against the Sabbatians' "licentiousness," they were much more concerned about their flirting (and sometimes open romance) with "the other" than with any libertine excesses. Mixing religious identities and values, not antinomianism, was the prime target of polemics.

"Redemption through sin" (*Mitsvah ha-Ba'ah be-Averah*) is a catchy phrase and a wonderful title for a scholarly essay. Yet to the best of my knowledge, the notion does not appear in any Sabbatian text: the concept itself is rabbinic (it is first used in the Babylonian Talmud)<sup>35</sup> and the only Sabbatianism-related source that invokes it is a confession of a repentant Sabbatian, in which, using rabbinic terminology, he denounces his former fellow believers.<sup>36</sup>

Second, the Sabbatian noninsularity and its provision of a God of living experience give the best inkling into the mystery of Sabbatianism's appeal and long duration. What Sabbatai Tsevi's religion offered to its believers was an accessible world and an accessible God. In Sabbatianism, Judaism ceased to be self-referential: Sabbatian thought developed in conscious dialogue with other faiths. The world's religious and cultural diversity was explored and explained. This satisfied the curiosity of believers, but it also infused with new meaning the constitutive Jewish experience, the experience of exile. Sabbatianism is usually conceptualized as a form of messianism. This conceptualization certainly accords with the heroic phase of the movement, from its eruption till, roughly, the death of Sabbatai Tsevi. Although later Sabbatian thought does contain some speculations concerning Sabbatai's "second coming," messianism as a privileged theme of reflection disappeared from the believers' discourse by the late seventeenth century. Scholem noticed this disappearance and understood the difficulty it presents for scholars trying to define the scope of their inquiry and answer the knotty question of whether or not a particular individual or text was Sabbatian. For Scholem, it is not the common subject matter that links different texts classified by him as "Sabbatian," but common terminology.<sup>37</sup> Countering Scholem here, I submit that a topical thread does indeed run through Sabbatian texts. This common concern is a sustained reflection on the meaning of exile, both in the sense of political exile of the Jews among the nations and the metaphysical exile of the Shekhinah among the *kelippot*. Tsevi's belonging-not-belonging to both Judaism and Islam was a profound expression of the messiah's elemental homelessness. Sabbatian converts were thrown into alien worlds and remained stretched between attraction and repulsion; the Sabbatian preoccupation with non-Jewish creeds and practices can be read as an attempt to make sense of the

drama of redemption both for the peoples of the world and for the Jews, who were scattered among them. Sabbatian thought was thus a dialogue with the world into which the Jews are exiled—neither able to fully join it nor to escape it.

As Sabbatianism dialogued with the world, it also dialogued with its God. The Sabbatian God was a God who could be reasoned with, even argued with; one who intervenes in temporal affairs; one who sometimes answers pleas and is sometimes painfully silent. For Sabbatai Tsevi, this God was first and foremost the God of direct personal encounter. Sabbatai's moments of ecstasy brought him into intimate proximity with *his* God. He "knew," with absolute certainty, that this God existed, acted in this world, and that he, Sabbatai Tsevi, was loved by Him and fulfilled His will. Yet this celebration of the existential immediacy of God had a darker side: Sabbatai's moments of intimate closeness to the "God of his Faith" could not be freely produced by an act of will. The intimacy was interlaced with periods of God's "silence," in which Sabbatai experienced an excruciating sense of abandonment and utter uncertainty regarding the right course of action. In Sabbatai's letters, the tension between God's proximity and distance was an existential howl (the best minds of his generation were destroyed by prophecies); in the writings of later Sabbatians, it was elaborated with infinite subtlety. Sabbatianism put forward a concept of a God who is simultaneously cherishing and untrustworthy. The Sabbatian God entered into personal rapport with his messiah and then inexplicably abandoned him. He is the God of Israel, who gave commandments to Moses and demanded that Moses's descendants break them. He made a covenant with his people and reneged on his part of the bargain. During the periods of his silence, the faithful lack any clue as to the course of redemption or even everyday behavior: traditional religious norms do not provide a basis for action—after all, God Himself has shown that they might be abolished—and the existential experience of God's guidance is impermanent and unsummonable.

It was precisely this concept of God that contained the seeds of Sabbatianism's own destruction. Sabbatianism after the death of Sabbatai Tsevi was conspicuously bivalent—the call to base religious life on personal religious experience clashed head-on with its inability to craft this experience into a coherent set of religious norms and practices. Perhaps the best contemporary analogy for Sabbatianism is offered not by millenarian or messianic movements in Christianity and Islam, but by the early modern nonconfessional Christianity ("Christians without a church") discussed in the classic study of Leszek Kołakowski.<sup>38</sup> Sabbatianism was a religion characterized by an irremovable antagonism between its



own most fundamental values and any translation of these values into institutions, structures, social hierarchies, standardized practices and rituals, or fixed tenets of belief. It attacked the existing religious structures, but was intrinsically unable to transform itself into such a structure. It was a religion of permanent rebellion, of unending motion. Like Kołakowski's nonconfessional Christians, the Sabbatians' heretical character was not accidental but essential: it was not a function of its condemnation by a *particular* religious authority, but rather emerged from its organic inability to establish—and to reconcile itself with—*any* religious authority.

In its most consistent—and therefore most radical—expressions, Sabbatian thought was perfectly aware of the ultimate consequences of its own position. Neither the tension between the God who is intimately close and the God who is frightfully distant nor the tension between faith and functionalism were ever resolved on some higher dialectical plane. If Nathan of Gaza indeed tried to soothe the sting of Sabbatai Tsevi's ideas by counterbalancing them with dialectical oppositions, he failed miserably. Early Sabbatianism gloried in the existential proximity of God and celebrated the discovery of spiritual freedom of approaching redemption. Later Sabbatianism expressed itself in sophisticated theological constructions, which engendered radical reinterpretations of the early optimistic Sabbatian soteriology. The religious sentiments of mid-eighteenth-century Sabbatai believers were epitomized not by the dialectical writings of Nathan of Gaza, but by a remark of an anonymous Sabbatian, who attributed to his messiah the following truly Faustian statement: "Sabbatai Tsevi declared: Since the God of Israel did not choose to fulfil my messianic destiny I will punish Him by causing thousands to abandon his faith."<sup>39</sup> Eighteenth-century Sabbatianism was a much darker creature than its seventeenth-century counterpart. The rebellion against the petrified structures of normative religion conducted by the "spiritualists" fighting the rabbis in the name of a new "utopian Judaism" (Scholem) or attempts to "revive and fertilize the Jewish religion" (Liebes) was to a large extent replaced by a rebellion against Sabbatai Tsevi, and in some cases a rebellion against the God of Israel Himself.

## Notes

1. Gershom Scholem, "Zum Verständnis des Sabbatianismus: zugleich ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der 'Aufklärung,'" *Almanach des Schocken Verlags auf das Jahr 5697* (1936–37): 36; Scholem, "Redemption through Sin," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, trans. Hillel Halkin (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 88, 92.



2. Scholem, "Zum Verständnis des Sabbatianismus," 35.
3. Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah 1626–1676*, trans. R. J. Zwi Werblowski (London: Routledge, 1973), 688.
4. Scholem, "Redemption through Sin," 88; Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), 306.
5. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 720.
6. Halkin renders this as "rationalizations"; see Scholem, "Redemption through Sin," 88. Compare, however, the Hebrew original of Scholem's essay, "Mitsvah ha-Ba'ah be-Averah," in *Mehkarim u-mekorot le-toledot ha-Shabbeta'ut ve-gilgulehah* (Jerusalem: Byalik, 1974), 18.
7. Scholem, "Redemption through Sin," 101–9; Scholem, *Major Trends*, 314.
8. Scholem, "Redemption through Sin," 109.
9. Scholem, "Zum Verständnis des Sabbatianismus," 37.
10. Scholem, "Der Nihilismus als Religiöses Phänomen," in *Judaica 4* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1984), 134.
11. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 288.
12. Scholem, "Redemption through Sin," 84.
13. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 327.
14. Scholem, "Redemption through Sin," 140–41; Scholem, "Ursprünge, Widersprüche und Auswirkungen des Sabbatianismus," in *Judaica 5* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992), 130.
15. Gershom Scholem, "Die Theologie des Sabbatianismus im Lichte Abraham Cardozos," in *Judaica 1* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), 146; compare Jacob Katz, "Relationship between Sabbatianism, Haskalah, and Reform," in Katz, *Divine Law in Human Hands: Case Studies in Halahkic Flexibility* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 23.
16. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 307; compare Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 211–17, 283.
17. Scholem, "The Crypto-Jewish Sect of the Dönmeh (Sabbatians) in Turkey," in Scholem, *The Messianic Idea*, 146, 160.
18. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 304.
19. Ibid., 315; Scholem, "Redemption through Sin," 98, 110, 147.
20. Scholem, "The Crypto-Jewish Sect," 142; see also Gershom Scholem, "Die Metamorphose des häretischen Messianismus der Sabbatianer in religiösen Nihilismus im 18. Jahrhundert," in *Judaica 3* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), 214.
21. Scholem, "Berukhiah—Rosh ha-Shabbat'im be-Saloniki," in Gershom Scholem, *Mehkarei Shabbeta'ut* (Jerusalem: Am Oved, 1991), 352–53.
22. Yehudah Liebes, "Ha-Meshihi'ut ha-Shabbeta'it," in Liebes, *Sod ha-Emunah ha-Shabbeta'it* (Jerusalem: Byalik, 1995), 19.
23. Ibid.
24. Liebes, "Al Kat Sodit Yehudit-Notsrit she Mekorah be-Shabbeta'ut," in Liebes, *Sod ha-Emunah*, 221.
25. Chaim Wirszubski, "Ha-Ideologia ha-Shabbeta'it shel Hamarat-ha-Mashiah," in Wirszubski, *Bein ha-shittin* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990), 225.
26. Jacob Emden, *Bet Yehonatan ha-Sofer* (Altona, 1762), 16v.
27. For the most synthetic account of this historiographic position, see Jacob Katz, *Ex-*

*clusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

28. See, for instance, Scholem, *Major Trends*, 296.

29. Scholem, "Redemption through Sin," 109; Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 69.

30. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 293.

31. Liebes, "Yahaso shel Shabbetai Tsevi le-Hamarat Dato," in Liebes, *Sod ha-Emunah*, 25.

32. Liebes, "Ha-Shabbeta'ut ve-Gevulot ha-Dat," in Rachel Elijor, ed., *Ha-halom ve-shivro. Ha-tenu'ah ha-Shabbta'it u-sheluhoteha: Meshihyut, Shabbeta'ut u-Frankizm* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2000), 7.

33. *Ibid.*, 14.

34. *Ibid.*, 21.

35. See BT Berakhot 47b.

36. Jacob Emden, *Sefer Shimush* (Altona, 1762), 20v.

37. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 302–3.

38. Leszek Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna. Studia nad chrześcijaństwem bezwyznaniowym siedemnastego wieku* (Warsaw: PWN, 1965).

39. Joseph Prager, "Gahalei esh" [Fiery coals], Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Mich. 106–8 (Neubauer no. 2189), vol. 1, 32r.



# II | Sabbatai Tsevi's Conversion and Its Interpretation

Reports of the conversion of Sabbatai Tsevi sent shock waves among his followers and his detractors alike. At first, the most ardent believers flatly denied the truth of these tales. Others developed a position akin to the Docetistic doctrines found in early Christianity: it was claimed that the “real” Sabbatai Tsevi never met the sultan and remained faithful to Jews and Judaism; the one who converted was a mere phantom or simulacrum of the messiah. Very few who had dared to publicly attack Tsevi before he became a Muslim adopted a triumphant attitude (Rabbi Joseph Halevi of Livorno is a notable exception). Several erstwhile followers rewrote their biographies and portrayed themselves as skeptics or even early opponents of the messiah. Sabbatian prophecies were ridiculed. Rabbinic courts collected evidence about the earlier transgressions of the messiah and his followers. Hostile accounts were gathered and widely publicized. Fact and fiction mixed in these accounts, yet a conviction of the deep and long-standing corruption of Sabbatai and his circle became the order of the day.

The particulars of the meeting between Tsevi and the sultan are lost to history. The leading narrative had it that the messiah was forced to apostatize. It was rumored that the sultan offered him the choice of Islam or death preceded by terrible torture. This story was also told with a twist: the alternative to conversion was said to be violent reprisals against Jews throughout the Ottoman Empire. Thus, in this account, Tsevi converted in an effort to save his fellow Jews. Alternatively, his adoption of Islam was a ruse, used by a spy entering enemy territory. Moreover, the guise was a temporary one, a “descent for the purpose of ascent.” Having conquered the forces of darkness in their own realm, Sabbatai Tsevi would return to Judaism and the People of Israel.

At some point during this tempestuous time, Tsevi penned his own version of the conversion scene. In this letter, the messiah’s adoption of Islam was the

conscious act of a lucid person. Fully volitional, it was a response to the call of the “True God.” Sabbatai embraced Islam “with all his heart.” Neither was the conversion temporary: Tsevi accepted Islam “until the time of the End.” Moreover, he called on Jews whose “souls agreed with his” to follow him into apostasy. Sabbatai’s account foregrounds his relationship with God, whom “he alone knew” and whose will was his ardent desire. Yet a further (and remarkably audacious) point was most pivotal for the development of later Sabbatian thought: a vision of a God who altered or annulled altogether the rules of the covenant he had established with his people. For Sabbatai, the True God had left Judaism, and: “without the True God, the Torah of Moses is no [longer] Torah.” Islam was not for Tsevi intrinsically better than Judaism. Yet it *became* better once it became the abode of the True God. And Judaism, once the locus of the true revelation, became an empty shell. Sabbatai’s God literally switched religions. In an arresting image, Tsevi did not merely follow the will of his God ordering him to apostatize; he followed God Himself: the messiah converted to Islam because the True God had “converted” before him.

Sabbatai’s letter is undated, but it was certainly written shortly after the conversion. Toward the end of 1673, Tsevi produced a second extraordinary document. The epistle, addressed to his believers, asked that they cease calling him “messiah” or “king”; instead, they were to simply address him by his private name or as “friend.” Specifically, Sabbatian festivals (such as the feast of the Ninth of Av) were to be cancelled and traditional Jewish observances were to be reinstated. Their belief in his messiahship should be kept quiet. Those who had separated from their communities should return home and reintegrate. All markers distinguishing the Sabbatians as a separate group should disappear. The “branches” of the Sabbatian faith should be “chopped down,” with only the “root” remaining, “buried in the believers’ hearts.”

On the face of it, this last theological statement of Tsevi is a sign of capitulation. The “True God,” whose unfathomable voice Sabbatai heard during his conversion, is conspicuously absent in this letter. Lacking divine guidance, Tsevi is forced to abandon his mission. However, the letter can be read differently. Sabbatai’s call to “bury faith in the heart” may not be a call to discard it; rather, it may be a call to hide it from the world. The true test of Sabbatian faith is the public denial of this very faith. Ultimate messianism is the rejection of any messianic hopes. Sabbatianism, in the last articulation of its messiah, was to be a faith of pure inwardness, utterly incommunicable.

Nathan of Gaza’s “Letter on Conversion,” composed in 1674 or 1675, is the

most comprehensive elaboration of mainstream Sabbatian theology attempting to explain the apostasy of the messiah. A Jewish prodigy, Nathan drew upon a wealth of rabbinic and Kabbalistic sources to demonstrate that the major canonical Jewish texts allude to a conversion of the true messiah. The thrust of his argument is that the apostasy—shocking as it may seem at first sight—is in fundamental agreement with the messiah’s earlier pattern of behavior, Nathan’s own prophecies, and most important, normative Jewish doctrines. The apostasy was not an abrogation of the Torah but its fulfillment, not a repudiation of Judaism but its affirmation. The rabbinic concept of “temporary injunction” is highly salient here: the commandments of the Mosaic Law were not abolished, but their validity was momentarily suspended. This suspension was limited to the messiah (in Nathan’s view, Sabbatai’s followers should under no circumstances follow him into apostasy) and had a strictly provisional character: before his death the apostate messiah would return to the Jewish fold. For now, the world was in a weird, indeterminate state, and Sabbatians were to observe most Jewish rites and commandments with the exception of the fast of the Ninth of Av within their own Sabbatian communities.

Nathan’s letter attests to the tremendous intellectual and spiritual effort made to keep Sabbatianism within the framework of mainstream Judaism. Against his messiah’s old and new detractors, Nathan contended that even the apostasy of the redeemer could be explained in traditional Jewish categories. This letter, however, had a deeper layer. I propose to read Nathan’s epistle as a response to the two letters of Sabbatai Tsevi. Sabbatai presented his apostasy as voluntary; Nathan argued it was forced. Sabbatai emphasized he did not convert in a state of illumination; Nathan argued precisely that. Sabbatai stated that he adopted Islam “till the time of the End”; according to Nathan, the messiah’s dwelling in the Muslim religion was not to last long. For Sabbatai, Islam became the true religion; for Nathan, it was a reservoir of demonic forces to be conquered. Sabbatai claimed that the Torah was abolished; Nathan affirmed the sacredness of the canon of Judaism and the underlying validity of its commandments. Against the messiah himself, his prophet argued that not even the founder of a religion has the right to undermine the fundamentals of the religion he is founding; not even the messiah has the right to deny his messiahship. The natural-born church builder, Nathan knew perfectly well that, without clear markers of Sabbatian identity and a canonical interpretation of sacred texts, the Sabbatian “church” would not survive. He rejected

both the messiah's call for all the Jews to convert from his first letter and his injunction to return the traditional fast on the Ninth of Av from the second (for many Sabbatians feasting on that date was the most important marker of difference between them and other Jews). In Nathan of Gaza's view, the Sabbatians were to be different from both Muslims and other Jews, remaining in suspension till the messiah's triumphant return to the faith and people of Israel. If this demanded the rejection of Sabbatai's most important theological pronouncements, that was a risk the prophet was prepared to take.